

From Log House to Cabin: Building in Log in Kentucky

by

Bill Macintire



Log House, Scott County, Circa 1820

Believe me my dear friends, the sight of a log house on these mountains after a fatiguing days Journey affords more real pleasure than all the magnificent buildings your city contains.

Mary Dewees, Mrs. Mary Dewees' Journal from Philadelphia to Kentucky, 1788

I love the rough Log Cabin
 It tells of olden time;
 When a hardy and an honest class,
 Of free-men in their prime:
 First left their fathers' peaceful home,
 Where all was joy and rest;
 With their axes on their shoulders,
 They sallied for the west.

Of logs they built a sturdy pile,
 With slabs they roof'd it o'er;
 With wooden latch and hinges rude,
 They hung the clumsy door:
 And for the little window lights,
 In size two feet by two;
 They used such sash as could be,
 In regions that were new...

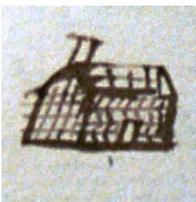
I love the old Log Cabin,
 For here in early days;
 Long dwelt the honest Harrison,
 As ev'ry Loco¹ says:
 And when he is our President,
 As one year more shall see;
 In good hard cider we will toast,
 And cheer him three times three.

“The Log Cabin, a Favorite Patriotic Ballad, as Sung at the Tippecanoe Associations, With great Applause...” (New York: Thomas Birch, 1840) stanzas 1,2, & 4.

The log cabin underwent two simultaneous and somewhat contradictory revolutions in the space of a century beginning about 1740. First, log construction evolved from a technique mainly used for temporary buildings to encompass the construction of permanent and elaborate houses, barns, churches and commercial buildings. Secondly, in popular culture, log construction became a metaphor for rugged domesticity and pioneer fortitude, mainly through its association with the story of westward migration. The image serving this metaphor is the owner-built cabin, slapped together with only an ax and a knife and no nails. Although they rarely survive, such temporary cabins once existed in very large numbers. They are often described in travelers accounts, such as that of Mary Dewees, who, during her journey from Philadelphia to Kentucky in 1787 wrote about staying at a “Cabin at the foot of the hill,” which had “perhaps a dozen logs upon one another, with a few slabs fer a roof and the earth for a floor & a wooden Chimney....”

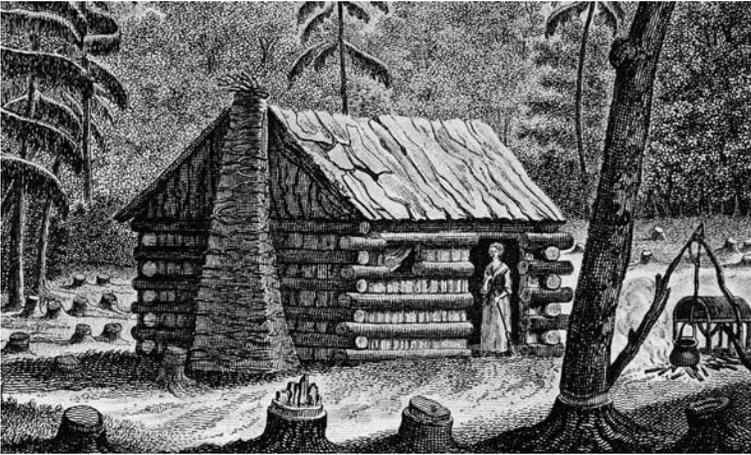
At the same time Dewees wrote, though, log construction was also used extensively for larger houses with masonry foundations and chimneys, elaborate woodwork, plaster, and exterior weatherboards. In Kentucky, as elsewhere, there were crude cabins, elaborate mansions, and buildings of every description in between all constructed of log. This article will look at only domestic log buildings – cabins and houses. There is a distinction between the two, although the line between is not always a clear one. In the first place, cabins are a type of house, but not all houses are cabins, and we usually mean something more substantial than a cabin when we say “house”. Cabins do not have to be built of log: Webster’s defines one as “a small, one-story dwelling, usually of simple construction.” Usually, cabins are single room houses, square or rectangular, sometimes with a loft or second half story, in the general range of 12 feet square to as large as 18 x 24 feet. But something that is not a cabin – a true house - can also have just a single downstairs room. The Cabin might or might not be owner-built, and the same is true of the house. The primary difference is an economic one: thrift and speed of construction are the primary attributes of the cabin; a sizable investment in labor and materials are the hallmarks of the house. In the late Colonial and early National periods in some parts of America, including Kentucky, log construction was the most popular method for building both.

Log construction has been known in Europe for centuries, but was not initially used by the European settlers of the Americas. They mainly built houses of wood frame and to some extent, masonry. Some settlers began using log building by the end of the seventeenth century, and the idea spread rapidly in the early 1800s as settlers spread out westward. Log became the preferred technique of first building for those clearing new land. Log cabins could be erected quickly, provided a certain measure of security in a dangerous environment, and consumed as many possible excess trees, which were being cut down to clear the land. Once a temporary shelter was secured, the settler would then concentrate efforts on improving the land, fencing, planting crops, and planning for a real house.



Settlement Cabin, drawing from Bourbon County land records.

¹ This is a reference to the Locofoco party, a group of radical democrats named after the unpredictable strike-anywhere sulfur matches of the period.



“An American Log-house” (detail), from A journey in North America, containing a survey of the countries watered by the Mississippi, Ohio, Missouri, and other affluing rivers (Paris, 1826) by Georges-Henri-Victor. This image is a mostly accurate depiction of a temporary settlement cabin with stick and mud chimney. This chimney is mainly for heat and light: cooking is taking place at the campfire outside.

Settlers used a strategy of stepping up from cabins to houses gradually. The first shelter was typically a very crude log cabin or just a tent, amateur built. Soon after, depending on their resources, they put up either a better quality log cabin or a small house, most often with at least the assistance of experienced builders, and finally, a larger house (not a cabin) of log, masonry, or frame, sometimes as an addition to the second smaller log house. Alternatively, the second log house could be relegated to use as a kitchen or slave house. The final house, in contrast to the others, was almost entirely the product of trained builders, who often included slaves. The houses might be built very quickly, or they could be, and often were, occupied in a semi-finished state for a season or several years. Thus, a log house might be left with its logs exposed both inside and out, but covered over with plaster and wood siding very soon after. Interior wood paneling and other finishes might also be put off for a time.

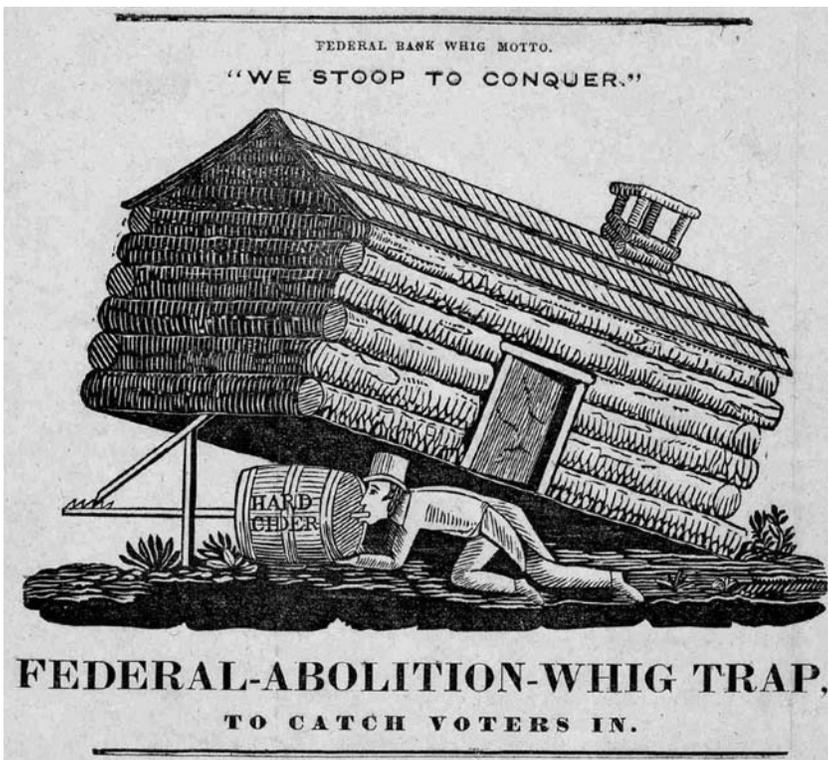


Log house, Bath County, circa 1810. This house has a substantial stone chimney, hand-planed woodwork, a plastered interior, and original weatherboard siding. It was built by highly trained and experienced carpenters.

Before log construction acquired its symbolic associations, it was first and foremost a construction method as unremarkable to the general populace as frame construction is today. At its pinnacle, though, in the early nineteenth century, log construction had reached a very high level of skill and artistry in the best houses. This indicates that the association of log construction primarily with the log cabin is an oversimplification of the real story. Today, common knowledge about log building ignores the fact that log construction was used not only for the poor quality shacks of settlers, slaves, miners, and the like, but also for the weatherboarded and plastered hall-parlor houses of the middling gentry farmer and the offices of the urban lawyer. The finer quality log houses have nearly been forgotten, probably because they do not square with the symbolic meanings the log cabin came to represent. As a symbol, the log cabin image rallied people to the cause of supporting political candidates, and to the purchase of such goods as pancake syrup, liver pills, toys, aftershave, and bourbon.

This popular image of the log cabin was already emerging when its use as propaganda in the Presidential campaign of 1840 expanded and elaborated the metaphor. William Henry Harrison’s opponents had disparagingly associated him with log cabins and hard cider, a popular and cheap intoxicating beverage of the time. Harrison embraced the epithet as a way of creating a populist reputation. The log cabin played a prominent role in the campaign propaganda for both sides of the election. Later, the association of the log cabin

with stories such as the childhood of Abraham Lincoln and with Slavery, most famously in Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin, elaborated the concept even further.



Campaign ephemera from 1840 election in Louisiana. (Library of Congress)

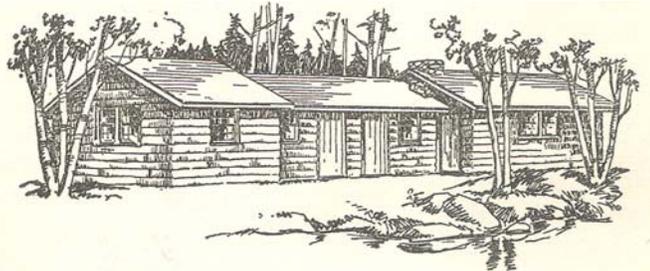
It is almost certainly not coincidental that at the same time the metaphor of the log cabin began to take hold of the American psyche, the building technique itself was rapidly being displaced by new technologies. These new techniques were faster, less expensive, and less wasteful of wood. As a consequence, higher quality log construction began to die out, and was almost completely gone by about 1875 in Kentucky. Even so, log construction continued in use for simpler cabins and houses in isolated areas well into the early years of the twentieth century. This, in turn, further reinforced the association of log construction with the cabin. As railroads, milling factories, architectural pattern books, and improved roads spread across the state, log building was relegated to cabin status, maintaining its role as an inexpensive construction method for amateur builders in rural areas, but losing its role as a material of choice for the well-built home of the emerging middle class. Wood frame construction and the new styles of shingles, gables, gingerbread, and large windows took its place in any area where construction materials could be readily transported.

In the early years of the twentieth century, as tourism increased with the expansion of roads and the automobile age, entrepreneurs exploited the symbol of the log cabin to promote tourist destinations. They dressed up motel cabins, gas stations, and eateries as log cabins, while local historic societies restored or reconstructed log cabins of famous ancestors as museums. The log cabin was particularly popular in the development of parks: thousands of structures in log cabin style, from pavilions to tourist cabins, were built in the nation's parks by the Civilian Conservation Corps during the Depression. Toys such as Lincoln Logs and Television programs such as *Bonanza* and *Daniel Boone* further popularized log cabins.

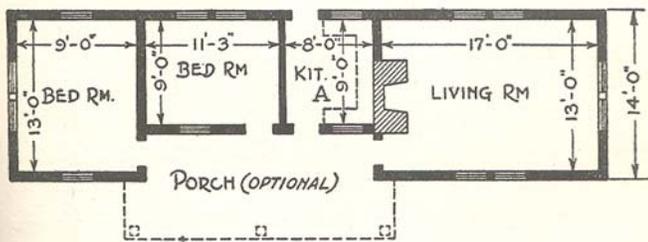


Mantle from a log house in Mount Washington, Bullitt County (now demolished).

It is mostly the crude log cabin that lives on in memory and myth today, to the point where all log houses are often called “cabins,” even though they usually are not cabins. The weight of the log cabin symbolism is such that the weatherboards on log houses are nearly always removed in a renovation. It is also not unusual for owners to remove features such as plaster, paneling, and chair rails without regard to the historic significance of these materials to the house. The loss of exterior siding is particularly damaging: water and insects easily infiltrate the walls, and they begin to rot, often failing in less than two decades after hundreds of years of steady service. In this way, the mythology of the log cabin indirectly leads to the destruction of the historic log house.



Early American history is recalled in this log cabin which is designed along lines similar to those used by the first settlers (Courtesy, Red River Lumber Co.)



Here is the floor plan of the early American cabin (Courtesy, Red River Lumber Co.)

Plan of a log cabin from How to Build Cabins, Lodges, and Bungalows (New York: Popular Science Publishing Company, 1934). The building actually has little resemblance to a real pioneer cabin, reflecting instead the craftsman style popular in the period the book was published. Part of the popular mythology of the time was that America's first settlers built log cabins, which were largely a feature of later settlement in the interior.

The log cabin lives on in memory, celebrated as one of the key components of the westward expansion of settlement. As settlers ventured further west, building cabins of log, sod, or hay bales, log construction continued to serve a key role in building the towns and farms they left behind. The log house deserves to be as well remembered as the log cabin. The Heritage Council has documented over 3,600 log cabins and houses – about 12% of all houses documented are log – but many more are unrecorded. The preservation of log structures of all types – cabins, houses, schools, churches, barns, and stores – is central to our continued learning, understanding, and respect for our shared heritage.

For further reading

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